

Bald eagle young settling into Vermont homes

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ADDISON, Vt.

Six young bald eagles are settling into their Vermont home atop a penthouse of sorts. At the edge of a small stand of woods, it has an impressive view overlooking the Dead Creek as it flows through the rolling farm fields of the Lake Champlain Valley.

The birds weigh about eight pounds now, seven weeks after they poked their heads out of their eggs in Maryland as 2 ounce hatchlings. Wildlife professionals and volunteers are feeding and monitoring them in the hope the birds will make Vermont their new homes.

"This is the time when they are imprinting on their surroundings so that they'll think this is home and will eventually come back into this area to breed," said Margaret Fowle. She is a wildlife biologist with the National Wildlife Federation and is manager of its raptor program.

The federation is working on an eagle restoration project with a number of other groups in which birds hatched in the wild in Maryland are captured and relocated to manmade nests in Vermont, the only mainland state in the country without a breeding population in the wild.

Although the eagles that have been relocated to Addison are old enough to eat on their own, volunteers push dead fish or birds into the back of the "hack box" in which they've been placed, much as an adult eagle would do for its young.

Bars on the front of the box prevent the birds from falling off the ledge before they're ready to fly. It's through those bars that the birds look east toward the Green Mountains.

The goal of the program, begun in 2004, is to re-establish breeding populations in Vermont of the majestic bird with the characteristic white head.

The chemical DDT decimated the populations of eagles and other birds several decades ago. In 1967 bald eagles were declared endangered and in 1972 DDT was banned.

Since the Dead Creek program began two years ago, 19 eagles have been released. The program is still too new for any of those birds to have bred.

Separate from the program in Addison, a pair of bald eagles hatched a number of young in a nest on the Vermont side of the Connecticut River earlier this spring. They were the first pair of eagles known to have reproduced in Vermont since the 1940s.

The program in the Champlain Valley is being coordinated by the Vermont Department of Fish and Wildlife along with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Wildlife Federation, Outreach for Earth Stewardship, and Central Vermont Public Service Corp.

Over the years, Vermont's retiring U.S. Sen. Jim Jeffords has helped fund the program.

This season it started with the capture of three birds in Maryland. They were taken to Addison, where they were placed in the hack boxes. Three more arrived on Thursday. Later in the season two or three more will be added to the growing population.

As the birds mature, they will start to flap their wings in the restricted space of the box. When the biologists deem them ready for flight, usually at about 12 weeks, the bars will be raised.

"We open the box in the middle of the night so we don't spook them out," said Eveleen Cecchini, the director of Outreach for Earth Stewardship, another group working on the restoration program. "And at first light some of them will take off as though they've flown their whole lives. They know exactly what they're doing."

The slow-moving Dead Creek, and the surrounding wildlife management area in the broad plain east of Lake Champlain, is a good place for the young eagles to learn to fend for themselves while being protected.

The birds will continue to be fed at the Dead Creek site through the end of the summer, until the birds no longer return looking for food. Then they're on their own.

This year for the first time, five of the birds will have electronic tracking devices attached to them so biologists can follow their progress after they leave Addison.

Eagles can travel long distances, but once they reach breeding age they are expected to nest within 100 miles of where they were raised, said Fowle.

Biologists expect about half of the birds to die during the first year. Three carcasses already have been recovered, including one hit by a train.

"It's discouraging, but it's to be expected, so we kind of brace ourselves," said Cecchini.

Dozens of volunteers from all over help with the program.

"The whole project was put together to make it a community project," Cecchini said.